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HEADLINE: FRONT PAGE: GEMMA LINKED TO BIN LADEN GROUP FUNDING SAYYAF, MILF

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BODY:

TOURISM Secretary Gemma Cruz-Araneta has been linked to a Muslim relief organization allegedly being used by accused international terrorists Osama bin Laden and his brother-in-law Mohammad Jamal Khalifa as a front to finance the operations of the Abu Sayyaf and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front.

The information was disclosed to the INQUIRER by a former member of the original Abu Sayyaf group, who uses the nom de guerre Abu Anzar.

Anzar was the Abu Sayyaf liaison officer and right-hand man of the late Edwin Angeles, one of the Abu Sayyaf founders who was its vice commander and chief intelligence officer.

Araneta served as board member and treasurer of the International Islamic Relief Organization (IIRO) which works under the Muslim World League.

Based on IIRO documents at the Securities and Exchange Commission, Khalifa and Araneta were among the five incorporators who signed the documents of registration. Araneta appears to be the only non-Muslim in the group. Besides Khalifa, the others are Zakaria M. Shikh, a Jordanian; Abubakar Sharifada, a Filipino and Alice Yabo, aka Jameelah, a Filipino and believed to be Khalifa's wife.

The IIRO was registered with the SEC on Sept. 20, 1991. It has a life of 50 years from the date of incorporation. To date, the SEC documents on IIRO lists Araneta as the treasurer.

Khalifa was IIRO's president and chair of the board of trustees. Bin Laden was its main financier, according to police and military intelligence reports.

As treasurer, Araneta was tasked "to act as such until her successor is duly elected and qualified in accordance with the by-laws, and that as such, she has been authorized to receive for and in the name and for the benefit of the association, all contributions or donations paid or given by the members," according to the reports.

Typo error

Araneta used her maiden name, Gemma Cruz, in the document. But Araneta's middle initial in the document is C., thus, Gemma C. Cruz, instead of G. for Guerrero, which is her mother's surname.

Anzar attributed the mistake to a mere typographical error.

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"The error was typographical. She cannot deny that she and Khalifa were together when they went to Mindanao in October 1993 and again in June 1994," Anzar told the INQUIRER in an interview.

"I should know. I acted as their security escort," he said.

Documents obtained by the INQUIRER confirmed that Khalifa was indeed in the country during the dates mentioned by Anzar.

Khalifa was issued passport numbers 024632 on Oct. 16, 1992 in Manila and AZ215927 on Jan. 29, 1994 in Jeddah, the intelligence reports noted.

2 meetings

According to Anzar, he fetched Araneta and Khalifa from General Santos City and brought them to visit the mosques, buildings and schools in Sirawan in Toril District in Davao City in October 1993. The projects were funded by the IIRO.

"It's impossible for Gemma Cruz not to know because the Muslim communities know," Anzar said. "To the Muslim communities, Khalifa is not only philanthropist but an international terrorist. So Muslims have high regard for him."

Khalifa, without naming Araneta, introduced her to the communities as the one who managed the IIRO's finances, Anzar said.

Eyebrows

In his first encounter with Araneta, Angeles introduced her to Anzar as the former Miss Philippines.

"I didn't ask the name because it was a no-no in our group. You just wait to be told, otherwise you would be mistaken as a government deep penetration agent," Anzar said.

She described Araneta as pretty, chinky-eyed and "very tall."

When showed recent photos of several former Miss Philippines, Anzar examined the photos and pointed to Araneta's photo as the woman he saw in 1993 and 1994 with Khalifa.

"This is Gemma Cruz. I could never forget her eyebrows," he said. "But she was prettier and younger in 1993 and 1994. She even had long hair."

But in their second meeting in Zamboanga City in early June 1994, Anzar said, Angeles introduced her to him as Gemma Cruz.

He said he was surprised to see Araneta wearing a Muslim dress that prompted him to ask Angeles whether she was a Muslim.

"Bro (brother), yang babaeng yan, may balak mag-balik-Islam. Yan ang dating Miss Philippines, si Gemma Cruz," Anzar quoted Angeles as having told him.

He explained that the "balik-Islam" was the term used when someone was converting to Islam.

"The visit was Bin Laden's and Khalifa's way of telling the Muslim communities highly influenced and penetrated by the Abu Sayyaf that the people got help because they support the cause of the Abu Sayyaf," Anzar said.

"They do the same in MILF-controlled areas," he added.

Though it set up livelihood projects, built mosques and schools and provided for the basic needs of impoverished Muslim communities, the IIRO also provided funds for the purchase of arms and other logistical requirements of the Abu Sayyaf, Anzar said.

In fact, he said, only 10 to 30 percent of the funds coursed through the IIRO went to the charity projects. "The bulk of the fund goes to terrorist operations of the Abu Sayyaf and the MILF. We have not lost contact with the MILF. We even coordinate with them. So we know they also get financial support from the IIRO."

He said the Muslim communities were aware that Khalifa and Bin Laden were "international terrorists and the projects were part of their agenda to win the hearts and minds of the Muslims."

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Wali Khan Amin Shah, one of the conspirators convicted in 1996 for his role in a plot to blow up US planes, told authorities that a Muslim charity run by Khalifa and backed by Bin Laden had financed the plot, according to US and Philippine intelligence reports.

Now believed to be hiding out in Afghanistan, Bin Laden, the youngest son of a Saudi construction magnate, is wanted by the United States for allegedly masterminding the attacks on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 which killed 224 people.

Khalifa was arrested in Sta. Rita, California, on Dec. 26, 1994 and was detained by the Federal Bureau of Investigation for using fake travel papers. His alleged ties to terrorist activities became evident on Jan. 6, 1995 when the police raided an apartment in Manila shared by Ramzi Yousef and Abdul Hakim Murad, both of whom were later convicted of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing in New York.

Khalifa was a frequent visitor here where he owned a rattan furniture factory on top of working with the IIRO.

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